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Intimate (dis)connections: Research, therapy, and “real” life

Introduction to Special Issue on Research and Therapy

Jonathan Wyatt and Sophie Tamas

Abstract

One nuanced argument threaded through the papers in this special issue is that in both therapy and qualitative inquiry there is the possibility – and risk – that testimony will bring ‘connection’. Such connection might be with others, with oneself, and/or with meaning. Connection often appears as the good that we pursue in research that cannot produce objective truth and therapies that cannot promise healing. But what is connection, and what does it do? Our paper responds to this collection by reflecting on questions about connection: how do we understand and experience it? Is connection love? And what does the prospect of connection imply for our practice as socially engaged, somewhat ethical scholars, therapists and human beings?

Key words: connection, testimony, writing, therapy

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Intimate (dis)connections: Research, therapy, and “real” life

Introduction to Special Issue on Research and Therapy

“Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change, truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts” (Salman Rushdie, *The Rushdie Letters*, 17).

Leaving behind the concrete steps, plastic chairs and bright umbrellas that trail the main conference building, they walk along the base of the imposing grass quadrangle. They bear right up its long sunny edge before heading east on the five minute walk towards the café. The two of them talk, glancing occasionally at the other, Sophie more animated, gesticulating emphatically, Jonathan looking puzzled, as if he doesn't quite get it. They brush shoulders as they turn onto South Goodwin, Sophie missing her step as the curb slips away.

The café, resting on the corner one block up, seems sleepy in the afternoon sun. They take a table in the shade and argue for a moment about whose turn it is to get drinks. Sophie lets Jonathan win, and he disappears into the café. She leans forward, setting the weight of her head in the palm of one hand and then frowning as the table wobbles under her elbows. As she turns to take a napkin off the mess on an adjacent table she sees a small, scrubby brown bird watching her from the shrubbery above a low brick wall. She holds its gaze for a moment and wonders, given what they've been discussing that afternoon, if one could call this 'connection'.

He pauses at the glass door, tray in hand, and watches her. She has folded the napkin into a tight square and bent over to wedge it under a table leg.

“Ginger lemonade for you, tea for me,” he declares as he reaches the table. “It can be your round tomorrow.”

“We're having drinks tomorrow, are we?”

He ignores the question and focuses on fishing his tea bag out of the pot.

“So, what did you think? Of the session,” he says.

She is not thinking of the session; the bird has caught her eye again and she is in a different coffee shop on the corner of a busy street, watching another brown bird peck crumbs on the doorstep while she sits with a coffee and a cookie after seeing her therapist. A barista with a pierced lip is mopping slush off the sopping floor mats. Cars wait, resigned, while someone pushes a wheelchair through the mucky snow on the road. A tall man with a wild grey beard is hovering nearby, snapping his fingers and dancing. She avoids making eye contact with him. In a moment the barista will put a hand on his back and say, “Hey, man, I don’t want to be that guy, but I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

She blinks. Jonathan has asked her a question. He has set a glass in front of her and turned to put the tray on the empty table behind him. She smiles. The bird in the bush is listening.

“Well,” she says. Pauses. No, she can’t retrieve it. “Sorry, what was the question?”

He laughs. “Where were you,?”

“Thinking of another café,” she admits, sheepishly. “They’re all the same, somehow. Places where people go to be alone together.”

He nods. “Like me and my mum.” She doesn’t get the reference and isn’t sure if it’s a joke or a story she ought to remember so she half-smiles.

“I thought the session was great,” he continues. “Stimulating. Thoughtful. It’s a shame not everyone was there.” He pulls a sheaf of papers from his bag and spreads them on the table as he speaks, as if he’s taking attendance. Her lips twitch in an imperceptible smile; how like him, to have all the contributions to the special issue printed and ready in his bag. She moves her drink away from the papers and wipes the table where it sat. He carries on, undeterred.

“It was a neat idea of Laurel’s, to see if the people who contributed to the issue wanted to come back and present papers on their writing process. Writing about research and therapy. Next year we could ask people to come back to talk about writing about writing about research and therapy.”

She nods. “Very meta,” and sips her lemonade.

He stops, pouring the clear murky tea into a yellow cup. He takes his time. He says, “Jeez, that was bland. ‘Great’. ‘Stimulating’. ‘Thoughtful’. Anyway, I had a good time.”

He looks across the table at her, taking in the blue dress and dark eyes. She’s gone, again.

“See the bird?,” she asks, pointing, but he turns too sharply and startles it. She shakes her head. “Now it’s hiding.”

“I’ve been answering my own question.”

“S’ok. Keep going.” Another sip.

“Well, one more thing. The loss. Like in Jeannie’s paper: the students all seem to yearn for something they’re not getting and that research and therapy can’t quite offer. And their lecturer, weighed down by the politics of what counts as evidence. I felt sad when I first read it, and sad again today, hearing her talk about it. Not without hope, though. It’s like my writing. Or my work with my therapist.”

“Ex-therapist. You quit.”

“I *finished*.” Who is he trying to persuade? Every second Wednesday he would leave his therapist’s office and walk to an alternative café next to an alternative bookshop in alternative East Oxford. He would drink coffee and write. His therapy left him feeling bleak and inadequate and the writing never felt complete but there were moments, he decides. In both.

She’s been quiet, he notices.

“It’s funny,” she says, after a long pause. She moves her lemonade again and keeps her eyes on the table, tracing a finger through the ring of condensation on the glass. She’s hunting for words but they’re hard to catch these days.

“It’s all so earnest,” she says, finally, though that’s not quite what she means. “The writing, the therapy, the writing about therapy. As if -“

She wants to say, as if any of this matters, but that sounds too depressed. He must know she’s depressed; he’s a therapist, after all, and they’ve been corresponding all year. But she doesn’t want to glance up and see that benevolent look in his eye; the face that his clients must see. Screw that.

“As if we actually know what we’re doing.” She looks around the quiet patio in sun-dappled shade, and sighs. “I dunno. It’s all so earnest. Writing, and therapy, and writing about therapy. Couldn’t we just have normal hobbies? It’s not like it leaves you with some fulfilling epiphany. There’s always a sense of loss, isn’t there? At least, I think that’s what Derrida means when he talks about the stranger being always already inside the house, inside us, each of us, always alone.¹ Writing is ghostly work because it’s reaching for a kind of presence it can’t ever grasp. It’s like Amia and Liz say: the way that writing toward an experience also necessarily misses something, and pins it into a particular shape that somehow is and is not representative. There’s always a gap.” A quick wry smile. “And now I’m one of those pretentious scholars who can’t resist random Derrida references.”

He drinks some tea, glances at her sharply, then down at his hands. A heavy, quiet moment.

“How’s Tessa?”, she inquires.

“I texted home after the session, while you were talking to a fan, to say it went well. Her exhibition opens tonight.”

“Difficult, to not be there,” she says, watching him.

“Yes,” he nods, still looking down. “Yes. It was a difficult decision.”

“I bet,” she agrees. “They usually are.”

“What?” he asks.

“Decisions,” she replies. “Difficult.”

He looks up for a moment, then away. “Yes.” He smiles briefly, then settles back in his chair. “So, do we not know what we’re doing, then?”

“You tell me, Doctor.” A grin. “Ever since I went on meds a few months ago, it feels like all this introspective angst over loss and connection and narrative and identity is missing the point.”

“Which is?”

She sucks at her straw. “We’re chemicals, stupid.”

He pauses, considering. She shrugs. “I dunno. Maybe it’s just harder to connect. I feel less of everything.”

“Is that progress?”

“I play with the kids more. And cry less. My back hurts less. For a while I didn’t feel like me, but. What is reflexivity worth if one pill changes the whole landscape? If we’re only one pill away from being the stoned homeless person getting kicked out of the café for disrupting the respectable?”

“Instead of sitting here, quietly drinking tea.”

“Playing scholar.”

“It’s a game, then?” he asks, “or are you back on your imposter riff?”

She rolls her eyes. “Of course I belong. I’m wearing Danskos. Do you know how many women in the session were wearing Danskos?”

He can see her feet though the table, toenails sparkling like disco balls. The sandals seem unremarkable, strappy and brown.

“Is it particular to qualitative researchers,” she muses, “or just an academic woman thing?” She can see that he’s lost. “It’s a brand. Expensive and comfortable. My mom wears them, too.”

“There was the one woman in leopard print heels,” he offers.

She snorts. “Porno shoes. I’ll bet you noticed. I spent the whole session wondering if she was wearing them ironically.”

“Oh,” he laughs. “So now I know what you thought of the session.”

She laughs too, and he watches her laughing, the heaviness seeming to slide off her shoulders. She notices him watching, and stops. Low sunlight finding a gap between the leaves catches the lines around his eyes, etched deeper since last year.

“What is it?” she asks.

“Hmm?”

“You’re not saying something.”

“Always.”

“Are you just humouring me?”

The barista, whose drudge of a turn it is to collect the empties, stops by their table.

“You done with that, sir?” gesturing at the yellow teapot.

“No, thanks, not just yet,” he responds, grateful for the interruption. The tea is too cold to drink but the cup gives him something to do with his hands. He is struck by the courtesy; at home they only call him ‘sir’ with sarcasm, if they are finding him difficult. “Thanks, though.”

She watches the server move on, collecting the detritus of other people’s moments. Then she looks back at Jonathan. She feels a surge of pity but stays silent, waiting, knowing that will make him speak.

He sighs. He's been trying to breathe lower these past few months, but it doesn't always work.

"I hate it that you're disconnected from yourself."

"Oh," she interjects, "so there's some 'self' in there that I ought to be connected with? Tsk. How un-Deleuzian."

"Fine." He persists, stung. "That you feel less. That you think none of this goes anywhere. That you only noticed the sandals. That you've gone. Kind of."

He's looking at her to check how she is taking this.

"And?" Giving nothing away.

"Because this matters. It has to. All of the papers, even ours, argue that this – writing, talking, research, therapy – is worth doing, don't they? That they make a difference, or can do. Carolyn's stories, for instance, her 'typical tales' from the summer: writing and being witnessed helps her get by, she says. I don't go with your bleakness. Not today, anyway. It's not pretence. It's not for nothing. Yes, meds – self prescribed or otherwise – change us, but so does writing, so does therapy, so does research. They take us somewhere different or change our chemistry. At least sometimes."

"Is that so, sir?"

"Yes," he insists, "I have to believe that. I can't let that go – and none of these papers do, either."

He is thinking of Jane's essay, and how she moves in and out of and in between writing and therapy, passionate about both; how she questions the distinctions. And how the two of them would enjoy Jane's spontaneous and subversive presence, at their table, now. They could do with more Jane in their disconnected, intersecting lives.

His voice has trailed off. He doesn't know what he can safely say. "And, anyway," he concludes, lamely, "Derrida doesn't say there's only loss. The other is always inside us as

well us ourselves. Especially when we lose them. Loss is always there *and* so is the life². The connection. Or can be.”

Her face has closed. She rubs her forehead and exhales sharply. “Is that what you want to put in the introduction, then? A rant in defence of usefulness and meaning?”

He sits back. “No – ”.

She interrupts. “Is it salvation by another means? Heaven without all the rules? You’re assuming that there’s something nihilistic about finding this work pointless. But it’s like trying to think about it from – “she looks around and spots her friend hopping under a table nearby – “that bird’s perspective. It truly *doesn’t* matter. And that’s okay. I just get worn out by all the commitment to *help*. Like we’re so agentic and responsible and altruistic.”

“But Liz resists the impulse to claim that both therapy and research ‘help’, doesn’t she? She’s really careful to do that. The psychoanalytic ‘gap’ that she describes involves both a space and loss. She’s aware of the limits.”

“But how many of us are that well theorized? *Of course* I want all this to help. But it does seem funny.”

“How?”

“All us scholars saying our work helps and the one who’s trained to help saying her work doesn’t.” She sees the in-breath of his rebuttal and raises a pre-emptive hand. “I know that’s oversimplifying Liz’s argument. And I know you and others are trained to help too. And I *didn’t* say I only noticed the shoes.”

“You can’t just dismiss the urge to make a difference as under-theorized.”

“There were also some stunning handbags.” Jonathan shakes his head and smiles, wondering if this is typical Canadian humour. She stops laughing, eventually, and continues. “I’m not saying the urge to help is wrong. I was raised religious. *Of course* I want to do good. But it’s not like theory saves us. Didn’t Deleuze jump out a window?”

“What would you like, then?”

She shrugs. “If a theory is unliveable, what’s it worth?”

“That’s reductive. Why tell stories at all?”

“Arendt said the political function of the storyteller is to teach acceptance of things as they are³. Which sounds terrible to me, because I *hate* acceptance. I don’t WANT things to be as they are. I want to fix them. To fix me. But I am tired of being seen as a problem to be fixed. I am tired of seeing others that way and how that makes them disappear, even when I think that I’m offering love. It just doesn’t help.

“Isn’t that what you write for? To sort things out?”

“That’s not the same as accepting. It’s more like managing, or avoiding.”

“Strange way to avoid things.”

“Oh, come on,” she says. “You displace things onto the page all the time. It’s because we’re cowards. Like T. S. Eliot said, poetry is an escape from feeling.”⁴

“It may be displacement but it’s not cowardice,” he argues. “You can’t tell me that Amia’s writers, or Carolyn, or Jane or Laurel or Liz or Jeannie are writing from cowardice. They’re trying to make sense of experience.”

“Which brings it all up out of the unruly body, and into the containment of prose. I’m not knocking it,” she says, “God knows it may be the only way I survive. And I know it takes courage. Or foolishness – I’m never quite sure where that line is.” She grins. “As you well know. But performing these stories in public?” She shakes her head.

“Bearing witness can build connection and community.”

“Or break it. Connection is a bitch. It’s not innocent.” She purses her lips and continues, more softly. “One of the many scriptural bits I memorized growing up said that not everything that is true is timely, and not everything timely is suited to the capacity of the hearer. It’s *not* all generative.”

“I’m not saying there is no place for secrets or privacy, and nor are the authors,” he replies. “But there’s a cost to keeping our inner life closed out of fear – especially if, at the same time, we’re claiming a theoretical allegiance to emergence and contact. Don’t you feel more connected to the authors from thinking with them, and reading their work, and presenting with them just now?”

She sighs. “Obviously. I’m like an open circuit. And they’re sincere and skilled and generous with their interior worlds. *Of course* I’m going to feel connected. How could I not? It would be like not smiling at a baby.”

“So?”

“How is that supposed to sustain me? It’s like visiting a butterfly house. It’s warm and moist and lush but at some point everyone goes home.”

“D’you feel abandoned, then?”

“Yes, Doctor. Let me tell you about it.” He’s hurt, for a second, by the sarcasm.

She continues, more dully. “I just wish it worked, that connection was some magical *thing* you could manage and cultivate and bestow, deliberately, without making a royal mess of things. Mostly it just breaks people’s hearts.”

“Well, *Doctor*,” he leans on the word, smiling, “Behar says that’s what makes this work worth doing⁵.”

“But our hearts aren’t just ours to mess with. We make other people bleed. Sometimes just by writing. Even in hyper-managed connection, like collaborative writing groups. It seems like it’s all about intimacy and flow until it isn’t.”

He studies his teacup.

“Sorry. I sound hostile.”

“You’re angry?”

She shrugs. “I’m usually the last to know.”

“I thought you were professionally reflexive?”

“Right.” She shakes her head. “I’m not really angry with you. I probably just feel stuck.”

“What do you believe in, then?”

“Teaching the kids how to do headstands in the kitchen in my pyjamas.” She smiles, apologetically, cupping her empty glass in both hands. “And, yes, I know, you could call that *connection*. As to whether that will make a *difference* to the world or our introductory chapter, I dunno. Maybe we should just do the usual dull paper summaries and praise.”

“Do you find it all too smarmy?”

“I’m not that condescending. But I do love the acerbic bits – like in Laurel’s piece. She gets almost snarky. It’s fabulous. Like lemon in an apple pie.”

“You don’t trust sweetness?”

“Maybe just not on paper.” He waits. “I started this ball rolling because I kept seeing these blurry gestures in the literature toward some causal link between writing and healing, some poorly articulated but presumed affinity between therapy and writing. And I wanted to push on that. Not just as an abstract question, but of course because it’s something I do myself. Writing my guts all over the page.”

“Did you get the answers you were looking for?”, he asks.

“Of course not. But it’s been an interesting conversation. The things we seem to think that therapy and writing can do for us.”

“And?”

“There’s a cow in some veterinary school that has a window in its flank. They cut her open and put it in there so students could learn about her digestive system. The cut will never heal as long as the window is there; she won’t die, her juices won’t fall out, but she’s got this gaping hole in her side.”

“Creepy.”

“And kind of cool, right? But definitely creepy.” She pauses for a minute, and looks away. “I did have a point.”

He is about to try to help her find the thread when she picks it up herself. “I don’t know how much difference there is between Carolyn’s kind of autoethnography and the self-writing that people did in the writing group Amia talks about. But it seems like there is some writing that is trying to close meaning – to stitch things up, let stuff heal over, make it all okay and seamless – and there’s other kinds of writing that sticks a window in there so you can see the gore. And that has a point – the students learn from looking at it – but I’m not sure it’s that great for the cow.”

“But neither Carolyn nor Amia propose that. Carolyn’s stories of her summer’s illnesses and losses don’t make those episodes okay. Nor do the seven stories from Amia’s group just gratuitously expose the gore. No one’s claiming either of those. It’s about *meaning*, they say. Or bringing the fragments together, as Laurel writes. Not neat, Hollywood tales, but hard-fought, messy forays into the unknown.”

She looks at him, surprised that he’s kicked back.

“I’m not talking about *them*,” she says. “It’s me. How do I know if I’m like the cow?”

“That’s a good question,” he says. The stock stalling line that he uses with clients in therapy.

“Maybe,” she continues, “it’s like when my friend had a general infection and had to have a tube sticking out of her abdomen, draining pus for weeks. Maybe that’s what we’re talking about when we say leaky text.”

“Charming.”

“The pus stinks. And she had to wear it to her prom.”

“Lovely.”

“But that’s what the past is like, isn’t it? You make do.”

“You should write cards for Hallmark.”

She laughs. “Oh, come on. If I was cheerful there’d be nothing for you to fix. You’d be bored.”

“Ah, so that’s why I’m working with you.”

“Obviously.” She sighs. “Do you actually feel that I’m gone?”

He shrugs.

She pauses, looking around for her bird. “If you were an animal, what would you be?”

He leans back and jams his fingers through his hair, leaving it dishevelled. “Time to go? Time for a walk? The cook-out’s starting soon. Final evening.”

“You give up that easily?” She smiles. “Come on. I’ll be good.”

“No, don’t be good. Anyway, I know you believe in connection. I’ve seen how you feel about Shawn and your kids, how they live inside you. How open and raw you can be. Have been. Are.”

“That doesn’t mean that connection is some kind of commodity that our writing can and should produce.”

“I don’t get where this claim of instrumentalism is coming from. It’s not in these papers. It’s all your stuff. Writing, research, therapy, they’re like —“he reaches for words, then laughs. “They’re like another way of making love⁶.”

“And me without my leopard-print pumps. You’re so sentimental.”

“You don’t believe in love, now?”

“Of course I do. But it’s not a get out of jail free pass. Sometimes it’s catastrophic. And, yes, I’m being melodramatic. There’s pills for that, too, I bet. ”

“I’m not saying that connection can authorize or legitimize our work. But it does bear meaning. It has value. I believe.”

She brushes at a fly on her hand. "I guess I keep sticking on it because it seems like the good that both therapy and research claim to produce. In slightly different flavours. But I think we've got to ask if connection or love or whatever we want to call it are inherently generative when they're also systems of control."

"I'm waiting for the Foucault reference," he carps.

"Bugger off."

"Which book was that in?"

"I did like it," she admits, "in Jane's piece, when she confesses to falling a little bit in love with her clients. We're so wary of the L-word when that's clearly what we're doing."

"This is where we got to in 'Telling'. This impasse. The 'you' in that piece railing against connection, the 'me' resisting that narrative. Here we are again."

She shrugs. "Fancy that."

Jonathan sighs and sits back. "You're too bloody smart."

"As if. I'm totally inconsistent."

He grins. "I thought it would be rude to point that out."

"If I really didn't believe in connection I'd write proper papers and probably have a tenure-track job by now."

"But then you'd be so boring."

"Yeah," she laughs, "being an angst-ridden artist with a mortgage and three kids is so much better. Besides, in anybody really boring? Or is that just a sign that you're not paying attention?"

"Not connected?"

He arches an eyebrow, and she scoffs, reaching for her bag.

"Cookout will be starting shortly," he says, checking his watch. "We going to go?"

The bird in the bush stops scratching at seeds and cocks its head, waiting to hear what happens next.

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¹ In Wylie, 2010, pp. 108-9

² Derrida, 2003

³ Arendt, 2000, p. 573

⁴ Eliot, 1967, p.10

⁵ Behar, 1996

⁶ Deleuze and Parnet, 2002; Gale and Wyatt, 2009